FOR GOD'S SAKE, BE KIND
July 11, 2010

JOHN BUCHANAN, PASTOR
FOURTH PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

Psalm 84
Luke 10:25–37

"Love the Lord your God
with your heart, soul, strength, and mind;
and your neighbor as yourself." . . .
"Do this and you will live."
Luke 10:27, 28 (NRSV)

I believed—and still believe—
that when all is said and done,
none of us will be measured
by how much we accomplish
but by how well we love.

Krista Tippett
Speaking of Faith

Startle us, O God, with your truth,
and open our hearts and minds to your Word,
that hearing we might believe,
and believing, live in the love you have shown
us in Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

"When all is said and done," Krista Tippett, host of the popular public radio program *Speaking of Faith,* suggests, "none of us will be measured by how much we accomplish, but by how well we love."

That is exactly what Jesus said one day to a man who asked a question: "What must I do to inherent eternal life?" Not "What is going to happen to me after I die?" which some think is the quintessential religious question but isn't, but "How can I live my life fully, every day of it, in the present?" He was a lawyer. "What does the law say?" Jesus asked in return. The man knew the answer to his own question. It was there in the law he loved, the Torah, the magisterial law of Moses: You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, strength, and mind (Deuteronomy 6:5) and your neighbor as yourself (Leviticus 19:18). "That's right," Jesus said. "Do that: love God with everything in you, your whole being, and love your neighbor

in the same way you love yourself—treat your neighbor as your want to be treated—and you will live fully, completely, authentically, joyfully."

The man is a lawyer, so he asks another question: "Who is my neighbor?" Jesus' answer to that question has become the most famous, most beloved story he ever told, maybe the most famous story in the history of stories. Even people who don't know a thing about Christianity or Judaism know what a Good Samaritan does.

Canadian theologian Douglas John Hall says that the story is the essence of Christianity, that if we are asked what our religion is all about—and we are asked in many ways every day by our secular culture—we can't go wrong if we simply tell this simple story of the Good Samaritan (*Feasting on the Word: Year C*).

Actually it's not simple at all. It has nuances and subtleties, like any good short story. A man, a Jew presumably, was walking down the road from Jerusalem to Jericho. It is seventeen miles, down all the way, steep, rocky, in some places through deep, treacherous ravines. The area around it is called wilderness—dry, arid, uninhabited—and is dangerous, the haunt of highway robbers. It's still there, that road is, but today tourist buses have to clear an Israeli checkpoint between Jerusalem, in Israel, to get to Jericho, in the West Bank, Palestinian territory. If you are on an Israeli bus, you proceed through the military checkpoint easily. If you are in a vehicle with a Palestinian license plate, you wait, sometimes a very long time. (I've been on both.)

The man walking down the Jericho road is mugged, beaten, stripped of everything he owns, including the clothes on his back, and left lying, unconscious, in the ditch beside the road. Before long, a priest appears, walking down the same road. He's a religious professional, a member of the clergy (ministers always cringe at this part of the story). He knows the law and looks and sees the man lying there in the ditch and walks on by. Pretty soon a Levite appears, another religious official, and does the same thing. Maybe they have an important meeting to attend in Jericho. Maybe they're afraid the man is dead and if they touch him they will be legally unclean and would have to return to the temple in Jerusalem for the cleansing ritual before going back to work. And maybe—and this is what really bothers us—maybe they are typical human beings, not bad people, just preoccupied, busy, and they don't want to get involved. I pass at least three people asking for my help every day. They are there every day. I don't know much about them other than the fact that they are asking me for something and I'm busy, have a meeting to attend. So I do exactly what the priest and Levite did. I make a wide circle around them and keep on walking, and I think about a little story Jesus told one time.

And then a Samaritan appears. Samaria, the area north of Judea, was a separate country during Jesus' day, with a religion similar to the orthodox Judaism of Judea but with enough differences to make Jews and Samaritans hate each other. It was a particularly virulent, toxic kind of hatred, that special hatred that gets going when fueled by tribalism, racism, and religion: Catholic– Protestant for centuries in Northern Ireland; Sunni and Shia; Israeli Jews–Palestinian Muslims. The man is despised, held in contempt by the citizens of the country through which he's traveling. But he stops, gets off his donkey, kneels down beside the man lying in the ditch, tears pieces of his own clothing into bandages and binds up the man's wounds after cleansing them with oil, and hoists the man up onto the back of his donkey.

You know the rest of the story. The Samaritan takes the man to an inn, checks him in and pays the bill, and assures the innkeeper that he will return when the man has recuperated and pay whatever balance there is.

"Which of these three," Jesus asked the lawyer, "was a neighbor to the man who fell among robbers?" There is only one answer, of course. The lawyer gives it: the neighbor was the man who showed mercy, compassion, kindness. "Go and do likewise," Jesus said.

Did you notice what happened? The question the lawyer asked was theoretical, abstract: "Who is my neighbor? Give me a definition of the neighbor I'm supposed to love in order to live fully." He wanted some outside limits. You can't love everyone after all. He wanted some boundaries. Jesus didn't really answer the question. Instead he defined what it is to be a neighbor. In Jesus' story, a neighbor is anyone who needs you, anyone who is in big trouble, anyone who is lying in the ditch beside the road. "Neighbor" is the one who needs you, even a person you have every reason to despise. Your neighbor is a human being who needs you. It could be your own spouse, your child, your partner, friend, workmate; it could be a total stranger. But the interesting thing here is that the answer Jesus really gave the lawyer was to a question he did not ask: "How can I be a neighbor and thereby find the essence of my own life?" Jesus' answer to that question is stunningly simple: be kind, be merciful, care, get out of yourself and start seeing and dealing with people who need you—your attention, your love, your strength, your help.

In our culture, religious morality is mostly defined in terms of rules, limits, boundaries—a religion that assures you that you are right, on God's side, going to heaven, or "righteous," to use a good biblical word, because of the things you haven't done and don't do. Jesus doesn't seem much interested in that kind of religion. Instead, goodness, morality, righteousness for Jesus is a matter of kindness, caring, extravagant, limitless, unreasonable, counterintuitive love.

The late Kurt Vonnegut wrote a story about a young man from Pittsburgh who asked, “Please tell me it will all be OK.” “Welcome to earth, young man,” Vonnegut wrote. “It’s hot in the summer and cold in the winter. It’s round and wet and crowded. At the outside, Joe, you’ve got about a hundred years here. There’s only one rule that I know of: (For God’s sake)—Joe, you’ve got to be kind.” (*A Man without a Country*, p.107, cited by D.J. Hall in *Feasting on the Word*).

As Krista Tippett was working her way through Yale Divinity School, her field work was as a chaplain on the Alzheimer’s and dementia floor of a community hospital. She found herself confronted with situations for which there were no formulaic, text-book answers. The people she encountered would ask her name and never remember it. “They were not interested in my background and education, the places I’d seen, the titles I’d held, the credentials. . . . They would only know if I was kind, gentle, patient, a good listener. . . . I could [only] come to know them, love them as they were. It was my greatest gift to them. But they gave me far more.” And then she says the most surprising thing: she started to experience the presence of God in these simple, mostly silent times of gentle kindness. She felt God “palpably in the silence. . . . I could not begin to take away their suffering. But I sat with it, with them. Sometimes we seemed to summon a palpable joy, a redemptive presence larger than ourselves” (*Speaking of Faith,* pp. 117–118).

I love something Miroslav Volf wrote. He’s a very distinguished theologian, is on the faculty of Yale Divinity School. He’s a Croatian, an army veteran, and he experienced perhaps the most lethal racial and religious hatred since World War II between Croatian Catholics, Serbian Orthodox, and Bosnian Muslims, a conflict that gave the world “ethnic cleansing,” maybe the ugliest phrase in our language. In a fine book, *Exclusion and Embrace*, he explains the dreadful divisions and hatred—racial, national, tribal, and religious—that erupt so easily in lethal violence. And yet Volf remains hopeful. “We need the grand vision of life filled with the Spirit of God,” he says. “We need reminders that the impossible is possible. But along with grand visions we need stories of small successful steps of learning to live together. The grand vision and the small stories will keep us on the journey” (pp .230–231).

Small stories—like the person I know who walks by the same *Streetwise* salesman on the corner every day and instead of walking by, smiles and says “good morning” and stops and chats and asks how he’s doing. “How old are you?” he surprised her by asking her one day recently. “Why do you want to know?” she asked. (I happen to know that this is not a topic she likes to talk about.) “Because it’s my birthday today,” he said. “How old are you?” she asked. “I’m fifty-two,” he said. “Well, I’m older than you,” she said

and told him her age. “I’ll never live that long,” he said. “Happy birthday,” she said.

Small stories—like the man driving down the road in southern Indiana and coming upon three young women, bicyclists, students at the University of Chicago Lab School, struck by a vehicle, gravely injured. Tony Cox stopped, tended to them as best he could, made sure their breathing passages were clear, probably saved the lives of two of them. On Easter Sunday, I mentioned the incident and the father of one of the girls, Kaia Tammen. Bruce Tammen sang “Swing Low, Sweet Chariot” to his daughter in intensive care after long and grueling surgery. The two young women recuperated sufficiently to attend commencement recently and so did Tony Cox, the man who stopped by the roadside and saved their lives and was presented an honorary University of Chicago Laboratory School diploma.

I was touched by what happened in the aftermath of the dreadful event. I called Bruce Tammen last week and asked him if I could tell this part of the story this morning and he agreed. Bruce Tammen came back to Chicago to conduct a concert by the Chicago Chorale of which he is the director. He wrote a remarkable message to his musicians: “I’m just back from Evansville. . . . Kaia is breathing on her own. Every parent fears and dreads the phone call I answered on Wednesday afternoon. . . . I am so grateful to everyone—to the man who discovered the bodies by the side of the road, the rescue team, surgeons, nurses . . . friends and neighbors.”

And then he preached the sermon I’ve been trying to preach this morning. “We really are all in this together—none of us is an island. Faith Dremmer’s death [the third young woman, who died] diminishes not only her mother and friends but all of us. And so does any death—in Gaza, Baghdad, in Peshawar, in Uganda.”

“As choral musicians,” he wrote to his singers, “we are uniquely situated to understand the power of community—we are utterly dependent upon one another for the true expression of our music. We are enhanced immeasurably by one another. We don’t, in fact, exist as a choir without one another, and our music would not even happen—Palestrina and Tavener and Durufle would be mute—without our communal efforts. My daughter would have died without communal effort—she was lifted and held by the efforts of a community of people, working together, accomplishing a miracle none of them could have done alone.” He concluded, “I want very much to conduct this concert tonight. . . . Let’s sing our hearts out.”

A grand vision and little stories like this one and the one about a man “going down from Jerusalem to Jericho.”

The word here—and Christians believe it is a saving word—a word that can literally save your life is . . . care. Look around and notice who needs you, needs your attention, your presence, your touch, your strength, your help.

The word that can save your life is be part of something bigger than yourself that allows you to be part of God's work of healing and helping and being present to people who are wounded by life. Give yourself to it—your love, your time and energy, and your money.

The saving word here is stop, kneel beside the road, which may not be a road at all but your office, your boardroom, your workplace, the bar, the restaurant you frequent, the health club, your own living room—stop, pay attention, listen, and be kind. Above all, for Christ's sake, literally, be kind.

The final saving word in this remarkable little story is that in Jesus Christ God comes to each of us, lying in the ditch beside the road, sitting at our desk, lying in a hospital bed, anxiously waiting in the doctor's office, standing in line at an ATM, sitting in a church pew.

Love seeks out human need. God comes with extravagant, unconditional love. And you and I will be measured not by our accomplishments and degrees and credentials, but by how we have received that love and then lived it every day of our lives.

Amen.